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ABSTRACT

The gap in literacy rates between women and men continually broadens. In 1985, 63 percent of the world's approximately 1,000 million illiterate people were female, compared to 60 percent in 1970 and 58 percent in 1960. A process of social change, including community involvement and mobilization in favor of women's literacy, is needed to sustain participation and overcome male resistance. Literacy programs seldom adapt to the real learning conditions of women, and special provisions for facilitating women's full participation are seldom provided. Women's motivation for becoming literate typically includes the desire to: (1) help their children study; (2) acquire more self-reliance and control over their personal life; (3) liberate themselves from isolation and absolute submission to received authority; and (4) participate in society in the same way men do. These are among the constraints on women's participation in education: lack of time because of family duties, lack of concentration because they must bring their young children with them to class, lack of exposure to anything but their mother tongue, discouragement because of the nonsupport of men, and lack of reading materials once they have learned to read. Programs that integrate literacy classes into activities such as health care and income generation for women usually reinforce women's reproductive and subordinate roles. Only national mass literacy campaigns (in such countries as Cuba, Nicaragua, Vietnam, Angola, and Ethiopia) have successfully mobilized and taught hundreds of thousands of illiterate women and men. Their teaching methods were traditional, but their content focused on national issues. The degree of female participation depended on community attitudes. Local (not those from the middle class) female teachers have been the most successful at encouraging participation. (CML)

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LITERACY LESSONS

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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY YEAR

Mobilizing women for literacy

by Agneta Lind

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INTERNATIONAL BUREAU OF EDUCATION

STRONG REASONS FOR PROMOTING LITERACY EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

On one occasion after another and in one declaration after another, time after time, the crucial importance of increasing literacy among women is emphasized and underlined. Yet, the gap in literacy rates between women and men constantly broadens. In 1985, 63% of the world's approximately one thousand million illiterate people were female, compared to 60% in 1970 and 58% in 1960. If one compares the literacy statistics of 1960 with those of 1985 it would appear that out of a total increase of 154 million illiterates, 133 million (86%) were women.

These data are only a few among many statistics which highlight the de facto discrimination against women in the field of education. In Africa and Asia the illiteracy rate among the female rural population is much higher than the overall rates for individual countries. However, in Latin America, which is more urbanized, poor urban women often account for the single largest group of illiterates of a country, for example in Brazil and Argentina.

Even though girls in many Third World countries currently make up between 40 and 50% of the total enrolments at primary school level, more girls than boys drop out before even completing third grade. This is one of several reasons for believing that female illiteracy in particular is likely to be substantially underestimated.

Given this serious situation, suprisingly little has been reported or studied concerning adult literacy for women. It is an utterly under-researched area, which needs much more attention.

THE GROWING GAP IN LITERACY RATES BETWEEN MEN AND WOMEN

The widening gender disparities concerning illiteracy in different regions is today worsened by severe economic constraints and unmanageable and increasing national debt burdens. The economic crisis is very likely to result in increased demands on women in their work and duties, as well as lower priority for literacy both among individuals and among governments. Without strong popular movements promoting women's participation, including in literacy programmes, illiterate poverty-stricken women will continue to be the victims and the most exposed to this crisis.

Achieving literacy could be one of the first steps in a process enabling women
... to take control over their own lives,
... to participate on a more equal basis in society, and eventually
... to free themselves from economic exploitation and patriarchal oppression.
In addition to social justice, human rights and equality, there are many other human, social and economic reasons to urge governments and organizations seriously to take special action to promote the literacy education of women and girls, a priority objective of the International Literacy Year. The sole fact that a mother's level of education has a positive effect on her children's health and progress in school should be a strong enough argument.

A process of social change, including community involvement and mobilization in favour of women's literacy, is needed to sustain participation and overcome male resistance. A common problem is that literacy programmes, often integrated with other practical activities, seldom adapt to the real learning conditions of women. Not enough time and attention is given to the literacy component, and special provisions for facilitating women's full partipation are seldom pro-

vided. Thus irregular attendance, high drop-out rates and weak results are common everywhere. The successful examples which do exist demonstrate the importance of the process of participation and awareness-raising, and of creative organizational and mobilizational approaches. They also show that literacy is a potential tool for empowering women.

ILLITERACY AS A RESULT OF DISCRIMINATION AND OPPRESSION

Illiteracy among women and men in Third World countries is linked to poverty, inequalities and oppression. Forms of patriarchial and economic oppression and subordination of illiterate women are to be found nearly everywhere, differing in accordance with the history and culture of each region and country.

The education system introduced by colonial powers sometimes tended to accentuate discrimination in different ways. Consequent inequities in access to school account for most adult illiteracy today. The traditional sexual division of roles in the family, as well as in the society, excluded most girls from achieving literacy through school. When girls did enrol in schools, often educational practices reinforced their subordination.

Even though the open discrimination practiced during colonial days is less common today, patriarchical ideologies and social systems that discriminate against women have persisted. This, in combination with the lack of provision for girls' and women's full participation in public education, has meant continued gender inequality. In fact, education systems of today reproduce not only the social class power structure, but also the existing gender differences. Nonetheless, equal access for females to formal schooling is a right that must be pursued.

WOMEN'S INTERESTS IN ACHIEVING LITERACY

In many African countries far more women than men, in particular among the rural populations, participate in literacy classes. Women have represented between 70 and 90% of the enrolled literacy learners in for example Botswana, Kenya, Zimbabwe and Zambia. Although it is true that the illiteracy rate is higher among women than men, this does not explain why so many women and so few men participate.

Women's tendencies to participate in literacy programmes are partly linked to changes in the social role of men and women. Women in many Third World countries, especially in Africa, are now actively involved in areas previously monopolized by men. With the migration of men to towns to take up employment, women have been left in charge of agriculture and general home improvement projects. Consequently, women in this situation see literacy as an instrument for coping in a understanding way with their responsibilities. It also creates a desire among women to be able to read their husbands' letters and to write back without having to call in other people to help.

However, it is clear that, due to hindrances of poverty, religious and cultural traditions and the social and political milieu, which impose strict enforcement of the economic and social subjugation of women, literacy in itself does not present a way out of the existing submission of women.

When literacy learners, female as well as male, were asked what they expect or want to learn from literacy classes, their most common responses were very unspecific, implying only a strong wish to learn to read, write and calculate. This was found in several different systematic surveys made in for example Bangladesh,

Botswana, Kenya and Mozambique. Observations and discussions have reached the conclusion that common motivations among female learners relate to:

(a) the desire to help children to study;
This is in fact one of the most commonly declared motives for literacy expressed by female learners. Moreover, when women are unable to participate in literacy programmes themselves, they often transfer their motivation to study and learn into a desire to see their children enrolled in school.

(b) more self-reliance and control over personal life;

> *Recently-literate women on the south coast of Kenya explained the advantages of having learned to read, write and calculate by referring to their new abilities to sign their names, travel, control money transactions, read medical prescriptions and instructions, and their resulting feeling of pride and self-reliance. 'Our eyes have been opened' was one typical comment.*
>
> (Learners' Panel at 4th Meeting of the International Task Force on Literacy, April 1989).

(c) liberation from isolation and absolute submission to received authority; and
(d) the wish to participate in society in the same way as men.

In spite of the many reasons for women to participate in literacy classes, the multiple traditional and new roles of women prevent them from regular attendance and efficient learning.

The most immediate practical constraint is the lack of time. Female learners are overburdened with domestic tasks, i.e. not only child-rearing, but also cooking and cleaning, fetching of water and firewood, farming and cultivating and undertaking other subsistence and income-generating activities. Just the fact of giving birth frequently, often every two years, leaves little time and energy for additional projects such as literacy. For literacy class attendance and learning, these duties mean frequent interruptions. Even when mothers attend classes they often bring their smallest children. Concentration on learning is obviously weakened when babies and toddlers need to be looked after during the lessons. These constraints are manifestations of the sexual division of labour and the reproductive role of women that impose upon them subordination and heavy domestic duties. Many other such manifestations, for example self-denial, lack of self-confidence and relative isolation from more literate environments, are additional factors working against full participation or success in literacy classes.

One effect of women's relative isolation and deprivation compared to men is that they have had very little exposure to languages other than their mother tongue. This problem is especially salient when literacy is taught in a second language, as is often the case in African countries.

Women are, moreover, directly discouraged by the attitudes of men, often including the male teacher, to their capacities in the classroom. Husbands and guard-

ians at times even completely forbid women to take part in literacy classes. Men are afraid that if women learn more than they themselves, it may expose their own ignorance and, above all, it may challenge their power position within the family. Such challenges to men can lead to violent reactions against women. Fear of a husband's or other male family member's violent reactions against her independent activities often prevents a woman from participating in literacy programmes.

Even where female learners in favourable contexts have managed to acquire elementary literacy skills, the sustaining of literacy is often even more difficult for them than for men. Available reading material is often not designed for women's interests and needs. Women often have less access to reading material and less time to read it. The support and mobilization which took some female learners through to literacy tends to dwindle when it comes to post-literacy, even where such a programme is provided. Through the multiple duties and constraints to which they are subject, women tend to be pushed out at a gradually increasing rate along the path through literacy and post-literacy. This is often worsened by curriculum designs which are too demanding and heavy.

It is very seldom that special provisions and programmes geared towards meeting women's immediate practical needs are organized, for example child-care assistance during class time, or opportunities for receiving intensive instruction. In some cases, for example in Burkina Faso and Mozambique, women have been offered literacy courses in boarding centres, away from competing demands and duties. Nonetheless, other problems have intervened in this context, such as poorly qualified tutors, shortages of food, uncomfortable living conditions and insufficient programme time for functional literacy skills to be learned.

'INTEGRATED' LITERACY APPROACHES REINFORCING WOMEN'S REPRODUCTIVE AND SUBORDINATE ROLES

In many state-run as well Non-Governmental Organization (NGO)-sponsored programmes, the response to the difficulties involved in running efficient literacy courses for women, in particular, is to integrate literacy classes into other meaningful activities. The idea is in principle well justified. The need, hence the motivation, for literacy and numeracy skills is created or reinforced through programmes related to health care, family planning, nutrition, income generation, etc. In this context literacy and numeracy should become necessary tools for learning more, controlling money and participating in community activities. However, this approach often implies that literacy instruction becomes neglected, since the participating women are expected to be involved in so many other activities at the same time. It is upsetting to observe that women organized in many integrated projects manage neither to generate income nor to learn literacy skills.

The content of integrated non-formal education programmes in which principally women are involved has mainly addressed the reproductive role of women. The productive role of women has been given less attention. Technical skill training in agriculture as part of non-formal educational activities continues to benefit men more than women. The problem is how productive programmes with sufficient financial resources are to be developed for women, when their traditional reproductive role remains unchanged. Such programmes can instead add to the already excessive workload of women and subject them to a triple burden.

The promotion of literacy linked to income-generating projects, among women in particular, is very com-

mon today. However, most such projects do not generate income, due to underfunding and underqualified staff. The members (mainly female) of the groups initiating projects are not trained in marketing and management skills; they also often lack the technical expertise to produce the intended products; they do not (or do not know how to) fulfil the conditions for credit and receive almost no management support for planning, implementing and developing the projects. An important disadvantage for many groups of this kind is precisely that most of its members are illiterate or semi-literate.

Priorities must be defined according to each context. The result of not clearly defining priority objectives, short term as well as long term, is the dilution of learning effects. An experimental project carried out in Andhra Pradesh state of India in 1972 is instructive in this regard. The project, Non-formal Education for Rural Women, contained literacy and mother/child care instruction. Three principal different designs were tested:

Group 1: a training programme with emphasis on reading, writing and arithmetic, with the content derived from child health care issues;

Group 2: a training programme concentrating on practical demonstrations and information on mother/child health issues;

Group 3: a combination of literacy classes and mother/child care demonstrations and instructions.

The results showed that Group 2 achieved the greatest progress in mother/child care; Group 1 *alone* reached a stage of literacy sufficient to maintain the skills, and Group 3 did not gain as much mother/child care ability as did Group 2 nor as much literacy as did Group 1.

The general experience of adult literacy programmes, organized on a large scale by the state or on a small scale by NGOs, indicates that without various forms of mobilization – awakening or creating motivation – the response is weak among the illiterate adults offered literacy. However, once people have been mobilized, literacy classes often attract a fair number of enrollees. Nonetheless, in most cases the majority of the learners attend irregularly or drop out before completing the course. The main problem is then to ensure sustained motivation and participation.

Only national mass literacy campaigns have successfully managed to mobilize and teach hundreds of thousands of illiterate women and men elementary literacy skills. Such campaigns have taken place in for example Cuba, Nicaragua, Viet Nam, United Republic of Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique and Ethiopia, where literacy was part of a national policy for overcoming poverty and injustice.

Both the state and the citizens concerned expected literacy to be one of many factors which would improve social, political and economic conditions and help develop human and material resources. 'National commitment' or 'political will' expressed through the state and/or a popular movement, incorporating all sectors of the society, and the capacity to organize and mobilize the people and other resources for literacy, were crucial for high levels of participation of both women and men.

In most campaigns the teaching methods have been traditional, but the contents have been focused on national issues, including themes stressing equal rights and the need for women's emancipation and equal participation in all spheres of society.

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COMMUNITY SUPPORT AND POLITICAL MOBILIZATION FOR LITERACY AND WOMEN'S EMANICIPATION

In national mass campaigns as well as more locally organized literacy campaigns, the degree of female learners' participation, in particular, has depended on community attitudes. While a superior and patronizing attitude among literacy organizers and teachers discourages interest, a democratic, open and involved attitude, treating the learners as equal adults and creating an atmosphere of confidence, is found to have a posivite influence on attendance and results. This is perhaps why local female teachers (not from the urban middle classes) for separate female learning groups often achieve better learning levels and participation among illiterate women.

In many cases the active involvement of local leaders in favour of literacy activities has been crucial in obtaining high levels of participation and learning. For example, in 1971, when the first drive of the United Republic of Tanzania's literacy campaign reached the island of

Why this commitment was so important was explained by a female learner, who was asked what her husband thought about her participation in literacy classes:

Yes, he grumbles a bit like men do. Some men are very worried, and they don't let their wives attend classes. But it is too late, I think. When the Area Commissioner held a meeting here both men and women were asked to come. We didn't dare to, in the beginning. But the cell leader had brought his wife, and she came back to fetch us. The Area Commissioner had complained that so few women were present and said that he would not start the meeting until everyone had met up. These classes have meant a lot to us.

(translated from Rydström. *Tanzanier.* Lund, Sweden, 1973, p. 59).

Mafia, the local leaders insisted that men and women were to participate. Separate classes for men and women were organized. In spite of feudal muslim traditions of oppression, the great majority of illiterate women and men enrolled and completed the programme successfully. Mobilizing visits by national leaders were followed up by the appointment of an Area Commisioner, who was a committed adult educator himself.

When commitment is manifested in the combined efforts of both national and local leaders with authority, as in this case, the effect is very powerful.

Nonetheless, initiatives by certain NGOs, such as the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) in Bangladesh and the Self-Employed Women's Association in India have been successful in organizing literacy projects for women. These cases show that literacy becomes meaningful when it has been linked to making women aware of their oppression, and at the same time to organizing and training them for effective self-reliance activities. Other crucial factors were commitment and sensitivity to needs, the organization of credit arrangements, and the organizational and mobilizational skills gained through active participation in the process.

Teaching literacy to Uru Indian women on Lake Titicaca in Peru.

Photo Unesco

POTENTIAL LIBERATING EFFECTS OF LITERACY FOR WOMEN

A number of observations further indicate that women's participation in literacy frequently gives rise to new situations conducive to struggles concerning women's liberation. Women become integrated into a new reference and support group. In the literacy class situation, the woman is in fact not available to perform certain domestic tasks at literacy class time, which necessarily rebound to the responsibility of other family members, sometimes male. She becomes able to manage new skills, which give her a potential new role in the family. The mastering of new skills may also give her greater opportunity for paid employment, leading to relative economic liberation. Whereas new skills enable her to produce an increased surplus from her agricultural labour, this however may not lead to any change in her economic status, if her husband controls its use or distribution. This may lead to tensions in the family.

Preliminary findings from a questionnaire sent out in September 1988 by the World YWCA (Young Women's Christian Association) to all of its member associations confirm such liberating effects of literacy. The responses show that:
Women who received literacy training are more respected in the community and at home. They have better skills in their search for jobs and can therefore earn higher salaries. They realize that some jobs which are traditionally considered to be for men only are for them too. They have better capacity to run small businesses and keep records on their own. They are strengthened in leadership roles in women's groups. Their political awareness, participation and organizational skills are enhanced. They gain better understanding of their rights. And they are in a much better position to help their children with their schoolwork.

The social and political context determines when and how literacy programmes are relevant for women. Indeed illiterate women often want to become literate, but relatively few manage to satisfy this wish. The constraints are often overwhelming, such as time-consuming duties, shortcomings in the design of the literacy programmes offered, and men's resistance. It is important not to overload the curriculum or to expect women to be involved in a variety of different programme activities at the same time.

Mass literacy campaigns, genuine political priority and community support for literacy have been most successful in mobilizing women to participate and complete literacy programmes. Men have been pressurized in these campaigns to accept women's participation in

Combatting illiteracy among women in Mexico.

Photo Unesco

literacy and in other social, economic and political activities. In response to women's long-term needs, it is important to promote awareness-raising on women's rights within the framework of literacy programmes, and indeed, this contributes to the potential success of such programmes.

There are no simple solutions without profound changes in the sexual division of roles and labour. The problem is not only the mobilization of women. Male attitudes and behaviour, in particular, must be addressed in order to overcome fundamental constraints preventing women from full participation in literacy activities.

The need to focus future literacy activities and studies on women's particular needs and constraints is obvious. Strong promotion of action research combined with training of researchers, trainers and instructors is recommended, as well as systematic reviews of available reports and research on female learners' specific situations.

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The International Bureau of Education acknowledges with grateful thanks this contribution by Agneta Lind to the cause of Literacy. Dr Lind is a staff member of the Education Division of the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA). She is a specialist on education in Third World countries, adult literacy in particular. She has many years of experience in the field of literacy. Her doctoral thesis focused on the implementation of literacy campaigns in Mozambique. She is a co-author of the SIDA publication *Adult literacy in the Third World – A review of objectives and strategies.*

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